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APPRAISAL OF TRANSITION CHALLENGES AND ADJUSTMENT OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS AT A NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY

ОЦІНКА ВИКЛИКІВ ПЕРЕХОДНОГО ПЕРІОДУ ТА АДАПТАЦІЇ СТУДЕНТІВ ПЕРШОГО КУРСУ В НІГЕРІЙСЬКОМУ УНІВЕРСИТЕТІ

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ABSTRACT

Advancement in educational pursuit seems to be an ideal dream for the majority of students preparing to leave secondary school to enter university. Students at this stage have conceptualized courses and professions they would like to follow, the types and names of universities they would

Просування в освіті здається ідеальною мрією для більшості абітурієнтів, які готуються закінчити середню школу для вступу до університету. Ця група абітурієнтів має концептуалізовані курси та напрямок професій, яким вони хочуть слідувати, типи та назви університетів, які вони хотіли б

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like to attend, and are mostly overwhelmed by the euphoria of leaving secondary school for university without the knowledge of the demands, the challenges and the expected behavior awaiting them in their envisioned dream of an institute of higher learning.

Purpose: This paper appraised the transition challenges and adjustment strategies of first-year students in Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

Methodology: A descriptive survey research design was employed. A simple random sampling technique was used in selecting five of the eight departments in the Faculty of Education. A convenience sampling technique was used in selecting 200 participants in the departments selected for the study. A questionnaire titled 'First Year Students Transition Challenges and Adjustment Questionnaire' (FYSTCAQ) made up of four sections was used to obtain data from the sample.

Results: The findings showed that first-year students experience transition challenges among which are cultural, social and economic. Separation, identification, and integration into the university lifestyle were coping strategies employed by the first-year students.

Conclusion: Raising the consciousness of the university community (management, lecturers and non-teaching staff, and even older colleagues) to render necessary assistance, provide necessary support, and motivate first-year students to develop workable strategies that will help them cope with the university demands were recommended.

Keywords: transition challenges, coping strategies, adjustment, first-year students, university experience.

відвідувати, і в основному приголомшені ейфорією від того, що вони збираються закінчити середню школу та вступити до університету, не знаючи про вимоги, виклики та очікувану поведінку, які чекають на них у їхній мрії про заклад вищої освіти.

Мета. У цьому дослідженні оцінюються проблеми переходу та стратегії адаптації студентів першого курсу в Університеті Обафемі Аволово, Іле-Іфе, Нігерія.

Методологія. Було використано дизайн дослідження описового опитування. Метод простої випадкової вибірки використовувався для відбору п'яти із восьми кафедр педагогічного факультету. Для відбору 200 учасників, відібраних для дослідження, було використано зручний метод вибірки. Для отримання даних із вибірки використовувався опитувальник під назвою «Проблеми переходу студентів першого курсу та їх адаптація» (FYSTCAQ), що складається з чотирьох розділів.

Результати. Висновки показали, що студенти першого курсу стикаються з проблемами переходу, серед яких культурні, соціальні та економічні. Відокремлення, ідентифікація та інтеграція в університетський спосіб життя були стратегіями студентів першого курсу.

Висновок. Було рекомендовано підвищити свідомість університетської спільноти (керівництва, викладачів та невикладацького персоналу, навіть старших колег) для надання необхідної допомоги, надання необхідної підтримки та мотивації першокурсникам для розробки дієвих стратегій, які сприятимуть їх долати університетські вимоги.

Ключові слова: виклики переходу, копінг-стратегії, адаптація, студенти першого курсу, досвід університету.

INTRODUCTION

Advancement in educational pursuit seems to be an ideal dream for the majority of students preparing to leave secondary school to enter university. Students at this stage have conceptualized courses and professions they would like to follow, the types and names of universities they would like to attend, and are mostly overwhelmed by the euphoria of leaving secondary school for university without the knowledge of the demands, the challenges, and the expected behavior awaiting them in their envisioned dream of an institute of higher learning. Bayaga et al. (2022) explained that most first-year students lack an understanding of what their experience will be at university.

This shows that first-year students (the newly admitted students in higher institutions of learning) are solely interested in the journey to the new environment and have little concern for the life at the destination. Research shows that first-year students encounter challenges at university (Bayaga et al., 2022; Rugbeer et al., 2020; Smallwood & Allen, 2020), even in an advanced educational environment. Evidence for this can be found for the U.S.A (Lapon & Buddington, 2024; Koo et al., 2021) Canada (Kanji et al., 2022; Lavoie-Tremblay et al., 2022;) Australia (Birbeck et al., 2021; Gosai et al., 2023; Kahu et al., 2022), and South Africa (Lekena & Bayaga, 2018; Greeff et al., 2021; Owusu-Agyeman & Mugume, 2023). This shows the advancement in the educational setting of a university does not make first-year students immune to experiencing transition challenges.

Transition adjustment can be regarded as many strategies employed by first-year students to mitigate the difficulties encountered in the new environment. Gale and Parker (2014), as cited in Gill (2021), see transition adjustment as the capability to navigate change. However, research has shown that the challenges facing students in higher institutes of learning have caught the attention of many organizations within the university environment, which seek to help first-year students adjust to the new environment with various support systems (McClean et al., 2022; Zatkova, 2024; Morton & Ramos, 2023).

Despite this, the adjustment decision still boils down to how each student can absorb the difficult transition experiences and mitigate them to produce adjustment mechanics for successful integration into university. Many studies conducted in this line of research focus on academic and social factors that affect first-year students in their first calendar year. There is also a need for in-depth studies to be carried out on factors like culture and economy (finance) that affect first-year students who now find themselves in a different cultural environment, having also to deal with the financial demands of the new university environment. Hence, this study aims to explore transition challenges and adjustment strategies of first-year students in Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

– Transition Challenges and Transition Adjustment of First-Year Students

The first days of university have been associated with multiple challenges for first-year students (Einboden et al., 2023; McClean et al., 2022; Sotardi & Dutton, 2022). It has been found that first-year students encounter academic challenges resulting from the stress of dealing with heavy educational demands (Sun & Zorah, 2015), like academic workload, attending lectures with overcrowded classrooms, lecturers' teaching style, excessive assignments after long hours of classes, lengthy reading and writing of term papers, examination stress and lecturers' attitude to students, which have not been the experience in secondary school where they came from. The resultant experience has negatively impacted first-year students' stability and academic advancement (Bayaga et al., 2022 Panja et al., 2023; Tormon et al., 2023).

Social challenges occur as a result of separation from families and friends (Fisher et al., 1985; Zhuhra et al., 2022); most times, first-year students make a journey to a new environment or country with a different social lifestyle. As a result of this, they face difficulties in establishing social relevance in the new environment in having

interpersonal relationships with other students, relating with lecturers and staff in the department (Tajvar et al., 2024), relating with colleagues in halls of residence, other students' attitudes like the stealing of properties and disrespect of others privacy, developing skills for time management and an independent lifestyle, having to take decisions solely on what to do and not to do, and determining when to sleep and to wake up (Rea et al., 2023).

Due to the stress or imbalance experienced in the new environment, first-year students experience social problems that significantly impact their learning activities (Babushko et al., 2022). Furthermore, the issues regarding cultural challenges of first-year students have to do with the cultural environment the particular university is situated in, which is sometimes usually different in cultural space to where the students came from, causing the students a feeling of dislocation from their initial cultural environment (Chow & Healey, 2008).

The cultural difference might even exist in the language spoken by the community where the university is situated (Nguyen et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2010), such as in Nigeria where multiple cultural and language differences exist. Further examples include the religion of the community (Javed, 2020), the food they eat, the clothes they wear, and the different norms, values, and beliefs of the community (Kong et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2015; Huei-Yi, 2020). In their study, Babushko et al. (2022) affirm cultural difficulties encountered by first-year students. The finding reveals that one of the crucial difficulties faced by the students is the lack of cultural competence and the language of the host country. Issues relating to cultural differences can impede first-year students' adjustment and hinder their academic advancement as supposed.

It is also important to note the financial demands at universities where students have to pay for tuition, buy educational materials, pay for transportation and accommodation at a university that does not provide hostels for students, and deal with inflation on the price of commodities in the university environment, such as food, clothes, books and, other costs related to their educational needs. The inability to meet all these needed expenses on campus can create acute financial trouble, including their well-being, especially for students from low-income families (Tajvar et al., 2024; Moore et al., 2021).

In the study conducted by Kumsa et al. (2020) four themes relating to financial difficulties experienced by first-year students were identified. These are challenges in not obtaining pocket from family or other financial sources, the impacts of limited stipends on essential basic needs and education, self-management, and the effect of limited stipends on socialization. It was reported that these identified themes had contributed to having a negative impact on learning activities.

Students progressing from secondary school to university need to adjust to challenges encountered in the university environment (Cameron & Rideout, 2022; Dias, 2022). However, transition adjustment is a complex process that first-year students must pass through. In line with numerous predictions of the first-year students' adjustment process, Credé and Niehorster (2012) suggested eight factors of students' adjustment to universities for academic success which are demographic characteristics, prior achievement experience at college, core self-evaluation and traits, state and traits effect, coping styles, social support, and relationship with parents. However, this study synthesizes various factors for student adjustment, identifying three phases in the

transition adjustment of first-year students, which are: separation, identification, and integration.

– **Separation**

The separation phase, considered as a detachment process, is a stage when first-year students detach from the previous experiences they have, the image and behavior of secondary school, the bond with their socio-cultural background, and associative thought of their formal environment. Even more critical, first-year students must detach from the influence of parents and family members, although, Wintre and Yaffe (2000) opined that first-year students' adjustment to university can be influenced greatly by the parent-child relationship. However, individual adequacy, autonomy, self-reliance, work orientation, self-esteem, and maturity can only be attained in the absence of external influence from parents (Khatibi & Sheikholeslami, 2016). Through this process, first-year students are able to unlearn, learn and relearn life adjustments, face the reality of their need to be independent, and adjust to the demands of the new environment.

– **Identification**

The second phase of adjustment is the process of identification. Identity is defined as the ability of a person to possess self-knowledge of him/herself (Camps & Morales-Vives 2013 as cited in Khatibi & Sheikholeslami, 2016). A factual experience of this phase will not only help students identify the stressors and challenges that could impede their advancement in the new learning environment, but also make them more resilient by allowing them to develop coping strategies necessary for success (Kuh 2001).

In the first six weeks of the semester at university, students should develop a sense of belonging, identify with the populace of the university community, and not see themselves as members of secondary schools. This will boost their confidence and assist in assimilating the norms, values, and suitable behavioral culture that will make them fit into the university environment. Difficulty in passing through this phase successfully will lead to an inferiority complex, making students feel unfit for the university lifestyle, and eventually leading to dropping out (Fabeku 2024).

– **Integration**

The third phase is the integration stage. It is the fulfillment of the adjustment process first-year students go through. Students can now adapt and cope with the challenges encountered at university having undergone separation and identification processes. The integration phase allows students to see themselves as fitting into the university environment that birthed a sense of belonging producing a positive adjustment mechanism (Barringer et al., 2023; Museus et al., 2018).

First-year students can now cope with the academic rigor, reading for extra hours, having group discussions with friends, attending social activities on campus to be socially fit, making and maintaining interpersonal relationships with friends in departments and halls of residence, joining and receiving support from religious bodies on campus, going to relaxation and recreation centers on campus, developing a sense of financial management, or engaging in menial jobs on campus. As a result of integration, students can then derive enjoyment from their experiences and come to view them as a normal part of university life.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is informed by Havighurst's (1972) theory of development tasks. Havighurst (1972) postulated that as people develop throughout infancy, childhood, adolescence, early middle, and late adulthood they make age-specific transitions. These transitions require a person to master various skills at every stage. According to the theory, the task for young adults includes developing new, more mature relationships with peers of both sexes and adopting a masculine or feminine social role.

This is realized when young adults learn to accept and use their physique and body effectively. In addition, young adults should achieve emotional independence from parents and other adults. Accordingly, individuals should acquire a set of values and an ethical system as a guide to behavior and should also desire and achieve socially responsible behavior.

The theory informs the study in as far as the first-year students joining university are obliged to adjust to the university environment, master the task of breaking from parental and high school teachers' support, and venture to carve a niche for themselves in life intra-personally, interpersonally, and careerwise. Students who are successful in making a smooth transition to university life are assumed to have navigated their university life successfully with the ability to make good personal and interpersonal decisions relating to social, academic, economic, cultural, and career development.

Purpose: This paper appraised the transition challenges and adjustment strategies of first-year students in Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

Research Questions

To guide the study, these research questions were raised:

Q1: What are the transition challenges of first-year students in Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria?

Q2: What are the adjustment strategies employed by first-year students in Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria?

METHODOLOGY

The research design for the study was a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised all first-year students in the Faculty of Education of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. A simple random sampling technique was used in selecting five departments from the eight departments present in the faculty. Using a convenience sampling technique, 40 students were selected from each of the five departments, making a total of 200 participants for the study.

A self-developed questionnaire entitled 'First Year Students Transition Challenges and Adjustment Questionnaire' (FYSTCAQ), which was made up of four sections, was used to obtain data from the sample. The instrument was validated using face and content validity and an Alpha Coefficient of 0.85 was obtained. Data collected were analyzed using frequency counts and percentages.

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Participants:

Demographic Characteristics	Group	
	n	&
Gender	Male	40
	Female	60
Religion	Christian	62.5
	Muslim	37.5
Mode of Entry	Pre-degree	30
	UTME	55
	Direct Entry	15

Note: Author’s Survey 2024 N = 200

The age of the sample ranged between 17 and 25 years, with a mean of (\bar{x} = 21.00) years and a standard deviation of (SD = 2.49) years. The result shows that 80 (40%) of the respondents were male while 120 (60%) of the students were female. The results also showed that 125 (62.5%) were Christians, while 75 (37.5%) were Muslims. It was also revealed that 60 (30%) entered through a pre-degree program, 110 (55%) through UTME, and 30 (15%) through the direct entry mode.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What are the transition challenges of first-year students in Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria?

To answer the question, the responses of first-year students in the public university of Obafemi Awolowo were collected and presented as follows:

Table 2

First-Year Students’ Challenges in Public University in Osun State, Nigeria

Views	A (%)	D (%)	Total (%)
Financial Challenges			
Inadequate stipends from parents and families	108	92	200
Inadequate funds to buy edu. materials	(54%)	(46%)	(100%)
Lack of stipends or scholarship from govt.	111	89	200
	(55.1%)	(44.9%)	(100%)
Expensive tuition and edu. materials	146	54	200
	(73%)	(27%)	(100%)
Expensive accommodation and food in host communities	100	100	200
	(50%)	(50%)	(100%)
Inflation of price of commodities on campus	137	63	200
	(68.5%)	(31.5%)	(100%)
Average:	120.4	79.6	200
	(60.2%)	(39.8%)	(100%)

Academic challenges			
Frequent disruption of academic calendar	132 (66%)	68 (34%)	200 (100%)
Lecturer–Student ratio	143 (71.5%)	57 (28.5%)	200 (100%)
Indifferent attitudes of lecturers and staff on campus	196 (98%)	4 (2%)	200 (100%)
Teaching style and methodology	137 (68.5%)	63 (31.5%)	200 (100%)
Underfunding of higher education by government	177 (88.5%)	23 (11.5%)	200 (100%)
Average:	157 (78.5%)	43 (21.5%)	200 (100%)

Social challenges			
Disengagement from friends at home and high school	151 (75%)	49 (25%)	200 (100%)
Inadequate recreation facilities	159 (79.5%)	41 (20.5%)	200 (100%)
Difficulty in associating with roommates in hall of residence	124 (62%)	76 (38%)	200 (100%)
Incessant disrespect of personal properties by roommates	175 (87.5%)	25 (12.5%)	200 (100%)
Incessant stealing of properties in hall of residence	152 (76%)	48 (24%)	200 (100%)
Average:	152.2 (76.1%)	47.8 (23.9%)	200 (100%)

Cultural challenges			
Religion and cultural differences	191 (95.5%)	9 (4.5%)	200 (100%)
Language differences among students	170 (85%)	30 (15%)	200 (100%)
Difficulties in understanding the culture of the locality	132 (66%)	68 (34%)	200 (100%)
Tolerance of the host community where university is located	119 (59.5%)	81 (40.5%)	200 (100%)
Lack of orientation from the university about the community	132 (66%)	68 (34%)	200 (100%)
Average:	148.8 (74.4%)	51.2 (25.6%)	200 (100%)

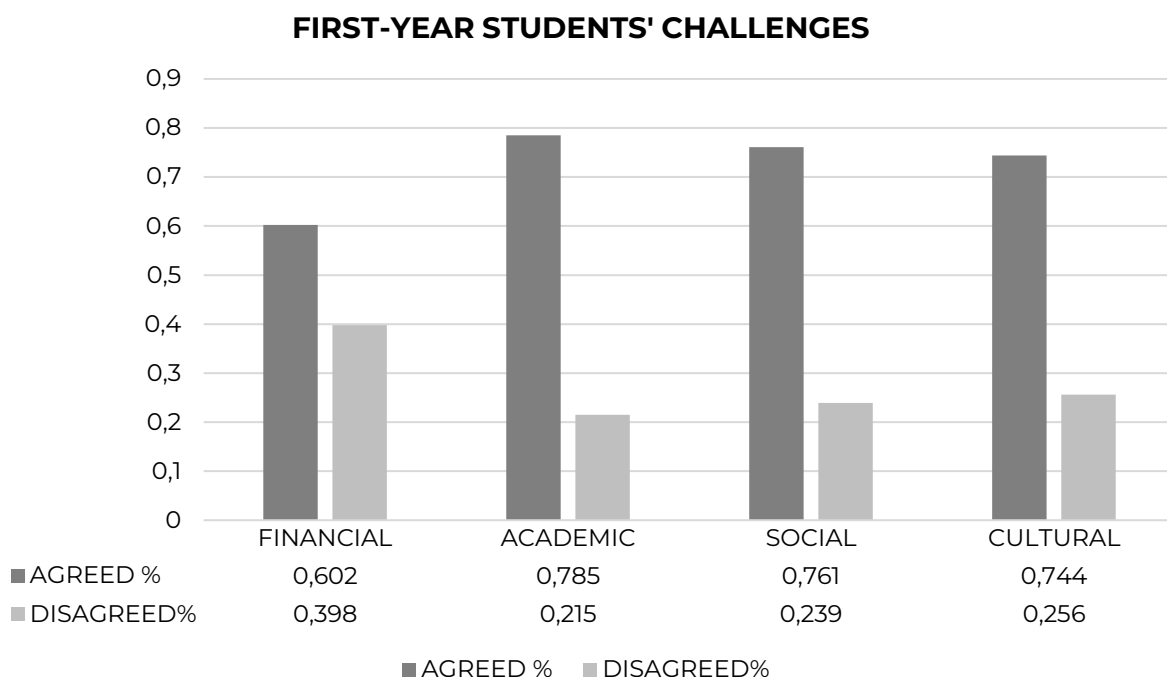
Note: Author’s Survey 2024.

SA = Strongly Agreed, A = Agreed, D = Disagreed, and SD = Strong Disagreed were used. The responses for SA and A were merged as A = Agree. Likewise, responses for D and SD were merged as D = Disagree in the process of interpreting data collected for the study.

Table 2 shows that the majority of the students agreed with the challenges itemized in the table, while a minority were not confronted by the challenges.

Figure 1

First-year students' challenges



Research Question 2: What are the adjustment strategies employed by first-year students in Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria?

To answer this question, the responses of the respondents used for this study were analyzed using percentages. A summary of the results is presented as follows:

Adjustment strategies	Views (%)	Views (%)	Total (%)
Financial			
Relying on stipends given by parents, family members, and relatives	120 (60%)	80 (40%)	200 (100%)
Working during vacations to pay tuition fees and to buy educational materials	130 (65%)	70 (35%)	200 (100%)
Relying on student loans to meet financial demand on campus	80 (40%)	120 (60%)	200 (100%)
Prudent spending on Campus	160 (80%)	40 (20%)	200 (100%)
Average:	122.5 (61.3%)	77.5 (38.7%)	200 (100%)
Academic			
Adapting to academic demands in university	139 (69.5%)	61 (30.5%)	200 (100%)

Attending extramural classes to understand lecturers' course concepts	150 (75%)	50 (25%)	200 (100%)
Seeking assistance from staff and senior colleagues in the department	110 (55%)	90 (45%)	200 (100%)
Reading longer, engaging in group discussions, and doing assignments	125 (62.5%)	75 (37.5%)	200 (100%)
Average:	131 (65.5%)	69 (34.5%)	200 (100%)

Social

Receiving support from religious bodies and senior colleagues on campus	137 (68.5%)	63 (31.5%)	200 (100%)
Participating in social activities organized by student bodies	172 (86%)	28 (14%)	200 (100%)
Using recreation, sport facilities, and relaxation centers on campus	140 (70%)	60 (30%)	200 (100%)
Building relationships with roommates, course mates, and other students	128 (64%)	72 (36%)	200 (100%)
Average:	144.3 (72.2%)	55.7 (27.8%)	200 (100%)

Cultural

Tolerating the culture and religion of other students on campus	149 (74.5%)	51 (25.5%)	200 (100%)
Adapting to and learning the language of the host community	118 (59%)	82 (41%)	200 (100%)
Relating with locals to understand the host community's culture	102 (51%)	98 (49%)	200 (100%)
Relying on university information about the host community	172 (86%)	28 (14%)	200 (100%)
Average:	135.3 (67.7%)	64.7 (32.3%)	200 (100%)

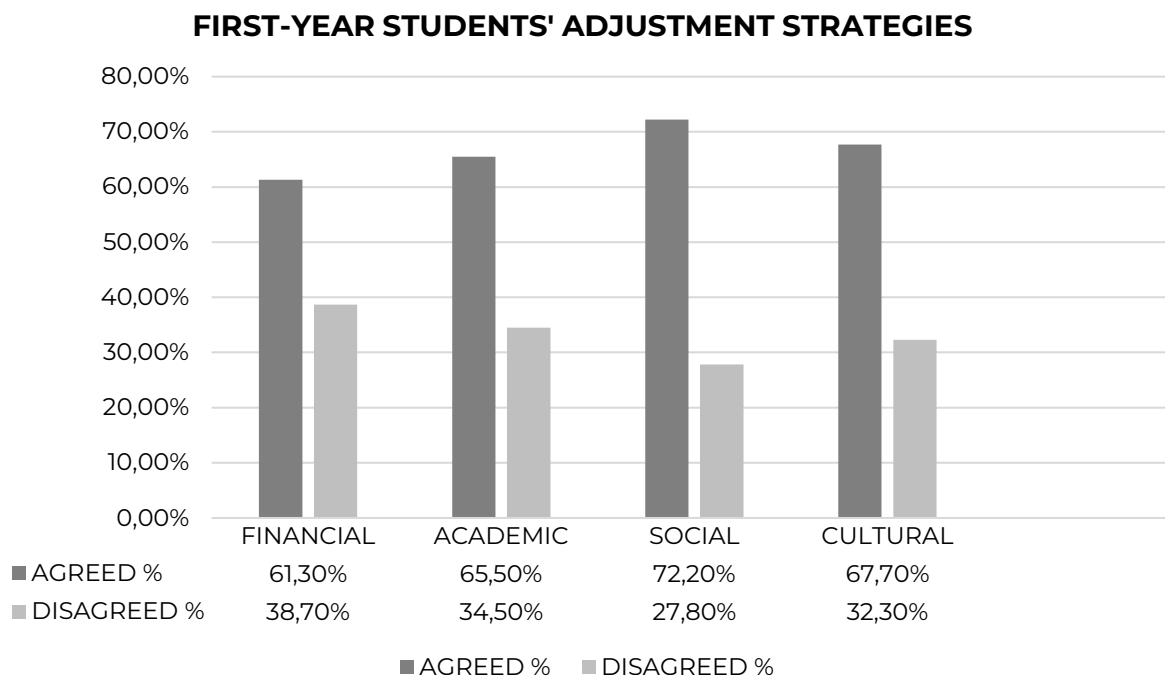
Note: Author's Survey 2024.

SA = Strongly Agreed, A = Agreed, D = Disagreed, and SD = Strong Disagreed were used. The responses for SA and A were merged as A = Agree. Likewise, responses for D and SD were merged as D = Disagree in the process of interpreting data collected for the study.

Table 3 shows the analysis of the responses that were obtained from the first-year students at Obafemi Awolowo University. The majority of the students applied the following adjustment strategies for the financial, academic, social, and cultural challenges respectively: working during vacations (65%), adapting to academic demands (69.5%), participating in social activities organized by student bodies on campus (86%), relying on the information given by the university about the community (86%).

Figure 2

First-year students' adjustment strategies



DISCUSSION

The results of this study showed that first-year students experience transition challenges, and the majority of the students devise different strategies in adjusting to the difficulties experienced. On the students' challenges, this study is consistent with the finding of Moosa and Langsford (2021), who found that the experience of first-year students negates their expectation, in the study conducted entitled "I haven't had the fun that is portrayed".

Furthermore, Panadero et al. (2022), in their studies on students' transition to higher education and assessment, explained the impact of transitional challenges as a result of the significant difference between college and a higher institute of learning. The studies further explained that there is a difference between the learning context of higher education and that of colleges. Factors such as teaching styles of lecturers, classroom size, population of students, lack of supervision, and need for independent study contribute to challenges faced by first-year students.

The results also indicate the academic and social challenges are the dominant challenges encountered by first-year students (Popovich & Aliyeva, 2023). This is in line with the study conducted by Azpeitia et al. (2023) who found that first-generation college students face academic and social challenges in their adjustment to colleges.

Holopainen et al. (2023) emphasized the role of educational support for first-year students in order to smooth their adjustment into university. The result also shows that majority of the student are intentional in their adjustment to university by devising various coping strategies. However, this study confirmed that first-year students are at the center of their own adjustment and adjustment to university will depend on the individual approach. This is consistent with the finding of Ding and Yu (2021) who

conducted studies on first-year university students' perception of autonomy and individualistic approach.

– **Recommendations**

Based on this study's findings, it is recommended that high schools should educate students about what university experience looks like. This will help first-year students prepare themselves for the expected challenges.

Universities should also develop programs like orientation services, student support services, systems and structures such as mentoring, career advisory, wellness, and chaplaincy to guide and advise students on how to cope in the university environment. The aim is to equip students with skills for social adjustments as well as the ability to make sociocultural and psychological adaptations, a view that has also been expressed by Brisset et al. (2010).

CONCLUSION

This quantitative study appraises the transition challenges of first-year students and their adjustment strategies at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. It was revealed that academic, social, financial and cultural challenges are the sum of experiences of first-year students. In mitigating these challenges, first-year students adopted various approaches to adjust to the university lifestyle and settle well in their new environment for their academic advancement.

Therefore, this study is expected to raise the consciousness of the university community (management, lecturers, and non-teaching staff, even older colleagues) to render necessary assistance, provide necessary support, and motivate first-year students to develop workable strategies that will help them cope with the demands of university. If this is advertently achieved, the university community tends to retain the large bulk of first-year students.

– **Limitation**

The study was conducted using one faculty (Faculty of Education) out of the 13 faculties at the university. Therefore, the finding could not be generalized to first-year students in other faculties within the university. Hence, there is need for more in-depth research to be conducted to determine the experience of first-year students in other faculties. Also, it is recommended that there is a need for more in-depth study on the entry age of first-year students as a factor that determines their adjustment to university.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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